

The Future of Media Relations

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When I started in media relations as an ex-reporter, the business hadn't changed much in decades. There were wire services, newspapers, magazines, TV and radio and one would work to get news into them using well established procedures such as schmoozing, press contact letters, press releases, press kits, events, publicity stunts, etc.

It wasn't long before media relations technology changed with dedicated word processors. That was soon followed by personal computers, then the Web. Today, few in media relations remember what it was to work in the business back then, and no one I know wants to go back. But, media relations is changing again: This time the shift is deeper. Most practitioners are well aware of circulation declines in newspapers, lowered readership of magazines, sagging viewership on network TV, time and place shifting of TV programming with Digital Video Recorders and Slingbox, the rise of V-casting on cell phones and the chaotic state of radio with satellite broadcasting, internet radio and Podcasting (MP3). They are aware of the rise of blogging, of experiments with interactive journalism, of community news sites and of commoditization of news on the internet. They know too with demand for measurement and integrated communications that media relations has to fight for its position in the communications portfolio.

It is worth asking what media relations will look like in five years. No one knows, but practitioners will work in interesting, if unsettled times and the bet is that much will be different.

There have been major changes already in four broad areas affecting media relations – how we work, how we communicate, the environment in which we communicate and legal issues. Many of these changes will continue to unfold. Some media and technologies will dominate while others will fade. We know from the internet's history that techniques like bulletin boards have come and receded while blogs are rising. We don't know if blogs will be supplanted with something else. There are numerous experiments with new media underway and efforts to find sustainable economic formulae.

How we work

The one area in which media relations practitioners will continue to experience change is in how we work. It is hard to believe some things we do daily are considered new media. These include e-mail, instant messaging, digital imaging,

automated calendars, webcasts, online media databases, custom web sites for media events; search engines, online press rooms and archives and online media monitoring. Other activities are new, or we might not consider part of media relations, such as search engine optimization, RSS (Really Simple Syndication), peer-to-peer file sharing (beyond music and video), web measurement, digital film-making; integrated marketing, online collaboration, VOIP, independent publishing of text, audio and video; information design; data visualization and usability. (If you understand all of the “buzz” words, you are technologically oriented.) Practitioners already face decisions about how to incorporate these buzz words into their work.

Changes in work habits have been evolutionary but inexorable. As tools become available and practitioners learn to use them to do their jobs better, faster and less expensively, media relations will move farther from anything veterans would recognize. The next five years will be continual evolution of what has happened for the last 20 years. In the old days – the 1980s – a practitioner needed a personal assistant to get press kits out, word process letters and do media follow-up. Today, the practitioner does that work. Ratios of assistants to practitioners used to be 1:1, then 1:2, 1:3, 1:7 and now, none at all. Headcount of media relations departments are, and will remain, small. This trend has happened across business generally as computers supplant support jobs with software. With online media databases and push-button mass mailing, practitioners can single-handedly run a large press campaign today, and this will not change. The temptation to spam journalists has increased because of this facility, and because many media relations practitioners don't know or ignore basic principles, they have done so. This will grow worse before it gets better, if it improves. One of the most important elements of better technology is better discipline in using it. (But it is unlikely that discipline will become a standard of media relations. There are too many naïve and heedless practitioners.)

There are three environments in which technological shifts will change how media relations practitioners practice their craft – large communications businesses with media relations units, independent PR firms and internal media relations. Large communications businesses will continue to move farther from traditional media in pursuit of growth while small agencies will specialize in media, technologies and techniques that their entrepreneurial founders know best. Large agencies are and will be a bundle of old and new media and technologies based on economic opportunity and internal demands for growth. Media relations will no longer be a core service but one of a number of services offered to clients – a move that is well underway. Small agencies outside of urban areas have typically been less dependent on media relations. This will continue and media relations will be even less of a factor. Small to mid-sized agencies in large urban areas may continue to specialize in media relations because of the number of mainstream media players resident in them. Because the large agencies have the most people and garner the most revenue in the PR

business, their size will dictate the future and importance of media relations as a part of PR.

Internal media relations face the issue discussed above. Do more with less. Technologies will accelerate this trend, and it will be linked more deeply to business success. Internal practitioners will answer a fundamental question more often: "What have you done for the business lately?" They will reply in competition with other communications techniques in order to gain budgets and resources. Defining program success will continue to be a major consideration for internal media relations departments, even though media measurement systems may vary. A few measurement systems will gain credibility and market share, if nothing else, to provide comparability. The systems will not necessarily be complete or accurate, especially when media relations works in areas that are not easily measurable such as the precise effect of publicity on positive regard for a company, product, service or candidate. Measurement systems will drive internal communications department behavior and by extension, agency behavior, as they are doing already.

Media monitoring has been and will continue to be essential media relations technology. Rapid spread of news stories, rumors and opinions is a condition that will not go away, and the time in which an organization's reputation can be threatened will continue to decline. With shrinking traditional media and rising online communications, such as blogging, and with millions of humans in many cultures venting opinions, monitoring has moved to a core of media relations task. Organizations will depend on outside monitoring services to provide wide-scale data collection from the internet primarily and sophisticated use of keyword filtering. Media monitoring technology is rudimentary compared to what is needed, but it is not clear PR vendors can supply the resources to advance it. Fortunately, media monitoring is an issue for governments, and governments have spent millions in developing better data mining and search algorithms. Some of this may find its way to media relations.

Media relations will be hampered over the next five years by a number of issues that plague the business today. These include spam, junk mail, viruses and worms. Many an e-mail will be killed by spam filters going forward and will require follow-up to make sure that an e-mail has gotten through.

Organizations will expect practitioners to produce better research to support story ideas and answer reporters' queries, especially with online resources on which to draw. Organizations also will expect practitioners to demonstrate better content mastery of what the organization does. Organizational focus, embodied in Chief Marketing Officers and brand managers, will be on Return on Investment (ROI) and on effective and efficient ways to communicate given target audiences, messages and media. Measurement will drive focus. Media relations, advertising, direct and new media will compete for budget based on ability to demonstrate success at the lowest cost. Media relations will remain a

commodity with the exception of practitioners detailed to serve corporate communications in areas such as corporate media relations, reputation monitoring, and financial communications not handled by Investor Relations. Organizations will continue to place importance on a practitioner's ability to synthesize facts into clear and compelling messages.

Skill sets that media relations practitioners need will blend old and new abilities. Here is a partial list in no particular order.

- News writing.
- News judgment.
- Knowledge of traditional and new media.
- Knowledge of organizations that practitioners represent.
- Contacts within industries where they work.
- Familiarity with editors, reporters, writers, bloggers and experts working in traditional and new media.
- Media research and targeting in multiple media, including bloggers.
- Telephone and in-person presentation skills.
- Concept development skills.
- Ability to develop creative ideas to gain awareness.
- Familiarity with media measurement technologies.
- Ability to research information online.
- Task management skills and an ability to meet deadlines.
- Word processing skills.
- Spreadsheet skills.
- PowerPoint (Electronic) presentation skills.
- Image manipulation skills.
- Database skills.
- Web navigation.
- E-mail management.
- Electronic calendar management.
- Digital camera skills.
- Software downloading and installation.
- Videoconferencing skills.
- Skills in storage devices to include CDs, flash memory cards and DVDs.
- Knowledge of how to use a scanner.
- PDA skills.
- Computer security knowledge and skills.
- Blogging skills.
- RSS skills.
- WiFi skills.

Part of this list doesn't look different from skill sets media relations practitioners need today, but it will vary in degree, especially as traditional media transition

into new forms. It will be harder in the future, although there will be more publicity outlets in nontraditional media.

Where media relations practitioners will come from won't differ much either from the present. Many will have experience from outside of PR. They may come from the media itself, from politics, as many do today, from law, from healthcare, etc. Part of the reason for diverse backgrounds is a need to find people who have familiarity with the business, its concepts and the people working in it. This might seem disappointing to graduates in PR studies, but PR has long been a second career for many practitioners.

Content and communications

The largest shift, as this article is written, is the move of traditional media toward online and the uncertainty this move is causing to media business models. This shift, in turn, is changing the way media relations practitioners work with the media. News cycles disappeared once the internet became established in the late 1990s. In an age of instant messaging and e-mail, practitioners get news stories hours or days earlier from the Web and can respond before the printed version appears. Reporters find web publishing as acceptable as appearance on newsprint, glossy magazine stock or the evening news. Indeed, traditional media, like *The New York Times*, have merged online and print newsrooms. In political PR, especially, this has generated furious spin and counterspin that occurs as much or more online as it does in traditional media. In the last US presidential campaign, bloggers rose from obscurity to prominence, and some would contend, had an impact on the outcome. This will continue and become more organized and professional than the first time out. Political parties will play to and co-opt bloggers, if they can, as counters to the news or supplements. Media relations practitioners will be neck deep in this work.

Immediacy is just one aspect in which the media have changed. Content publishers understand more deeply that readers/viewers drive media acceptance and not institutions. This has always been true but perhaps was forgotten in the 20th Century as newspapers then networks became monopolistic institutions. Publishers have learned to their dismay that there is no constitutional right for newspapers to be first among equals in journalism nor does network news influence the national agenda. That is why, for example, local newspapers are taking national and international news off front pages and moving it to summaries inside the first section. Their audiences have already read the national and international news on the Web and aren't going to read it again. That is why network TV is changing how it presents the news in order to stop audience declines. What readers/viewers want is regional news that local newspapers and electronic media source themselves and is not available online through wire service reports. Wire services themselves are in the midst of change as they try to decide where their future lies. As news consumers change preferences for news consumption, media relations will be forced to change with them.

News consumers are also demanding – and getting – from once standoffish media a chance to talk back. This is a trend that goes back to the future. In the early days of journalism, newspapers were smaller and editors more accessible. (Indeed there are comical stories of how accessible they were to unhappy readers.) There are numerous experiments underway to get readers more involved in the news process. As involvement increases, media relations practitioners have more opportunity to talk back and get messages out, even though reporters have refused to carry them. This raises an interesting conundrum. Traditionally, media relations practitioners have relied on the third-party editorial process to vet messages before carrying them to give them credibility and to give messages distribution that could not be gained otherwise except through more expensive and less credible means, such as advertising. With “talk-back” sections in online newspapers and community-generated news, practitioners have more opportunity to speak out but comparatively less credibility. The media themselves have lost credibility under assault from outside critics, such as bloggers, who are watching them more closely. Media relations practitioners are beginning to acknowledge the credibility issue, but they don’t seem to know what to do about it except to continue as they are doing. Practitioners still hold up certain media as “gold standards” of credibility, but it that may no longer be the case five or more years into the future. It is too soon to tell whether or how media relations practitioners will adjust to changes like this.

The ease of publishing on the internet has evolved into blogging, wikipedia and online news communities where individuals generate the information, and publishers or individuals themselves edit for accuracy and style. Such audience-generated information already has changed industries, such as book publishing. It is important now to get a good reader review about a book on Amazon.com and preferably high up on the book’s page. There are instances too in which competing authors, or their friends, race to place negative reviews on the page before a positive one appears. Grassroots media (see <http://ourmedia.org/>) are well underway in a range of venues from communities to industry sectors and professional associations. It is analogous to magazines and trade papers that have relied on individuals in an industry to write stories and features. This will provide enormous opportunities for media relations, but practitioners will need to exercise restraint in writing and presentation to prevent news articles from becoming shilling. Unfortunately, it is unlikely that practitioners will do so.

Perhaps the most important trend in communications of content is cost. The internet has collapsed the cost of publishing. Virtually anyone can publish content anywhere at any time in cooperation with, or opposition to, mainstream media. Many blogs, for example, live symbiotically by commenting on stories reported in traditional media. But, they don’t have to. One can self-publish internet TV, images (from cellphones and otherwise), radio, newspapers and zines internally and externally. This in turn has increased the availability of

information and media in the online marketplace and increased opportunities to enhance or attack the credibility of organizations and individuals.

An outcome of the collapse of publishing cost is that it has done little good for mainstream media that depend on advertising lineage and airtime buys to sustain reporters and editors and generate profits. Advertising is leaving mainstream media, especially network television and classified newspaper lineage, and moving to the web where economics are unsettled. Traditional media are caught between the new media world and the old one. They are maintaining presses and broadcasting facilities at the same time they are web publishing. This contradiction and continual squeeze of their revenue and profit models will continue for years. Most will find a way to transition: Some won't. Media relations practitioners, as they do today, will find themselves moving back and forth between traditional and online media to get messages out.

One more trend that new media have created is news-on-demand. This trend drives Podcasting and video-on-demand where one has the option of accessing news when he or she wants it in a format he or she desires. News on demand seems contradictory to news immediately, but isn't. News consumers want to go to a news source at any hour of the day. They dip into and out of the information flow to get what they are seeking without being overwhelmed by the flow itself. This is why news aggregation has become so important as have technologies like RSS (Really Simple Syndication), which allow consumers to select just the news they want and the time they want to receive it. Media relations has already adapted to this because it is similar to the way public relations newswires work. Firms like PR Newswire maintain searchable databases of releases that anyone can access at any time.

With all of these changes, what will happen to media relations? Practitioners will continue to work with reporters online for the most part because it is the fastest and easiest contact method. Using the telephone became difficult more than a decade ago with the rise of voice mail. Surface mail was bypassed long ago. Online newsrooms and release and information archives will assume even greater importance than they have now. In fact, they may be one of most important media relations functions over the next 10 years. Media relations practitioners will have major responsibilities in keeping newsrooms and archives up to date and complete, and they will merchandise web sites as resources for reporters as they do now. Use of newsrooms will widen to self-published media, such as blogs, but newsrooms will largely remain archives and not sources of breaking news, which is usually served to wire services first. The exception is web conferencing, which is used heavily in the dissemination of financial news and has applications in crisis communications when a company needs to get information out quickly and new product or service launches when press events are carried online. There will be use of blogs in online newsrooms to feature information not in press releases, such as calendar items of interest, product reviews, CEO comments, crisis communications, etc. There will be interactivity

among reporters and media relations specialists through the newsroom in addition to direct contact through e-mail. Newsrooms will serve up multimedia as they do now – print, audio, imagery, video, real-time stock pricing, etc.

The future is now

Every branch of media relations is online today. The future will be more so. Marketing communications, crisis communications, brand communications, reputational communications, financial communications, industry relations all are largely conducted online, principally through e-mail, web sites and conferencing. Increasingly, activities will include blogging and Voice Over Internet Protocol (VOIP) in which telephoning is done by internet. CD-ROM press kits have already largely disappeared in favor of Adobe pdfs, and press releases will become both multimedia and interactive in order to gain attention for online information and to build rapport with reporters who will be increasingly isolated behind barrages of information. The future will not be one of too little information but of far too much and the challenge for media relations practitioners will be to generate content that is of interest to reporters then to make sure they consider it. There will be as much or more emphasis on story lines and stunts to gain attention, and personal relationships with reporters will be more important than ever. The idea that one can work facelessly with the media has always been less than perfect and will be more difficult in an era when thousands of e-mails hit in-boxes daily. In fact, there has been some movement already to go back to old-fashioned reporter schmoozing in order to overcome the barrier of too much information and too many contacts. Personal relationships, however, will not overcome the need for content in the self-interested relationship that exists between media relations practitioners and reporters. Reporters will continue to favor media relations practitioners who help the reporters do their jobs, bring them good story ideas and keep them on deadline as mutable as deadlines will be.

One important change is that media relations is no longer local. It is global. A company in Peoria with operations in Guangdong, China, can expect bloggers and reporters to contact them from China as readily as from Peoria. One must assume that whatever is written or published can be seen anywhere in the world by anyone – and will be. Therefore, there is no future in attempting to isolate news. Moving work from Peoria to China is news in both places and likely to be covered in both. It is also news in Washington, DC where Congressmen and Senators will want to know what is happening and why and news in any location where employees have relatives. News coordination, therefore, needs to be broader than ever because reactions will be instantaneous.

Added to the burden of media relations across all disciplines are the threat of online anti-campaigns, such as boycotts, that try to involve legitimate media in reporting them in order to scar the reputation and credibility of companies. With globalism, these campaigns can come from anywhere at any time – and will.

Legal issues

The law is still finding its way around the internet, but the law is hampered by the global nature of it. Few rules apply to every nation and countries such as China handle the internet quite differently than the US or Canada. Media relations practitioners confront legal issues daily now but it will grow worse. The bugaboo is copyright and legitimate use of content. Some practitioners today post media clips online and practically beg the media to stop them. They should expect the media to become more stringent about copyright violations.

Privacy and security are two other issues that will become nightmares for media relations practitioners. The issue here is not so much media relations practitioners violating privacy and security laws but others violating them and “outing” a company for some perceived violation. Such violations include hacking into company databases to find embarrassing information and exposing company proprietary information to the world at large. This is happening already. It will get worse. Lastly, fraud and abuse will be issues that media relations will tangle with. Faux publications and self-appointed “critics” will appear online and attempt to “extort” ad revenue or other monetary consideration from companies in return for favorable reporting. Most of the time, these people can be brushed aside, but not always. They tend to be persistent and they will do anything to gain a company’s attention, including reporting verging on scandal. These kinds of publications exist today, but there will be many more of them in the future and more opportunities for fraud and abuse. The chances of stopping these kinds of stories will be made more difficult because reporters and editors can stay in countries that are out of the reach of US law or make defamation suits difficult to launch. A hard task of media relations is to stop the flow of abusive and fraudulent reporting before it hits mainstream media who begin independent inquiries.

Summary

Who knows whether any of these predictions are correct? The reason this article is dated is to help those in 2010 to return and see whether what I have written is close to the mark. I will preen five years from now, if I have been, and make no excuses, if I haven’t. Predicting the future is risky business because, as is said on Wall Street time and again, past performance is not predictor of future performance. But, the trends discussed here appear to unfolding for the long term. Come back in five years, and let me know if I’m right.

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